

FDA Requires Faster Food-Safety Alerts

By **JARED A. FAVOLE**

WASHINGTON -- The Food and Drug Administration on Tuesday launched an electronic food registry for companies to quickly report potential food-borne illnesses to the federal government.

Food facilities must alert the FDA within 24 hours of finding any contaminant in a product that might severely sicken or kill people or animals. The system is intended to foster a quicker response to food-borne outbreaks, and was required under a 2007 law after the FDA was criticized for its response to a number of problems with food and drug safety.

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Boxes of peanut-butter crackers at a food bank in Indianapolis in February wait to go to a landfill after salmonella contamination prompted the recall of several peanut products.



In some past recalls, the FDA has been notified only when people get sick, said Michael Taylor, a senior adviser to FDA Commissioner Margaret Hamburg.

"This will allow us to catch [the problem] before people get sick," Mr. Taylor said.

All food and animal feed companies will have to send the reports. Makers of infant formula and dietary supplements won't be subject to the requirement because they already report contamination problems to the FDA through a different electronic system.

Under the new program, companies would report a problem if, for example, they suspect bacterial contamination such as salmonella. The FDA will be able to ask companies for more information about the potential contamination and may ask them to conduct an internal investigation.

Companies that don't report potential food-borne outbreaks within 24 hours may face an injunction, fines or other punishment. Prior to the launch, many companies submitted reports of potential outbreaks to the FDA voluntarily.

The launch of the FDA registry comes as Congress is considering a sweeping food-safety bill that gives the FDA more money and authority to order recalls of products. The House passed a food-safety bill in July, and the Senate is expected to take up its version this fall.

After a spate of outbreaks involving peanuts and peanut products, spinach, cookie dough and hot peppers, among other items, consumers have been pressing for tougher regulation. A new poll commissioned by the nonprofit Pew Charitable Trusts released Tuesday found that 89% of likely voters want the federal government to adopt new food-safety measures, and 83% say the government should be responsible for ensuring food safety. The poll, conducted between June 29 and July 3 by Hart Research and Public Opinion Strategies, has a margin of error of 3.1 percentage points.

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